

**GEOLOGY:** Carboniferous limestone is the principal formation & the cavernous & permeable nature of that stone in the isthmus separating Lochs Mask & Corrib is apparent in the peculiar "swallow holes" & strange curiosities which are visible all around.

Limestone rock frequently crops up over the surface of the ground to the N. & E. of Cong & on the E. shore of L. Mask. It forms extensive beds of smooth bare rock, possessing the phenomenally consistent characteristic of a pronounced dip towards the N. & revealing, where the rock is split or sundered, an invariable north-south inclination or "grain". Water action has given the rock a pitted, honeycomb appearance in many instances, particularly near the lake shores.

On the N. shore of L. Corrib, fossiliferous Silurian rocks occur, & on the lake-side near Cong, gneiss schist & primary limestone are found, with, from that vill. to L. Mask, outcroppings of the carboniferous mtn limestone surmounting the primary rocks.

Yellow sandstone, fossiliferous Silurian, grits, gneiss, conglomerates, igneous rocks & the predominant

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carboniferous limestone are found to the E. of Cong, on the distr. bordering the lake as far as Cross &, again, to the S. of that little vill. Sir Wm. Wilde reported the presence of "a small mineral vein containing lead ore, & a trace of copper & mundic" in the townland of Ballymagibbon. He also mentions the discovery of "good Silurian fossils, supposed to be of Upper Llandovery age" to the W. of Ashford & at Lisloughery & Gortachurra townlands & the neighbouring islands. W. of Ashford also, Wilde discovered a Chiton in the carboniferous limestone - this was, in his time at least, only the second locality in which Chitons were recorded as found in these beds, the other having been discovered near Rathkeale, Co. Limerick.

There is a notable absence of fuel-providing bogs in the vicinity of Cong & the land, where free from the intruding limestone rock, is good arable & pasture.

The great vertical holes, shafts or caverns which abound near Cong are objects of great wonder to all visitors, as are the strange underground waterways which connect the two great lakes. There is no visible continuous stream, but the from L. Mask, which is on an elevation of nearly 40' over that of L. Corrib, is carried via subterranean channels through the cavernous rock. In several places the water rises above ground surface, but always only to form a big pool or perhaps run on for a short distance before diving once more into the ground. To the N. & E. of the vill. of Cong the streams rise again in four big pools, two of which now form the shore but for the remaining wide & swift-flowing Cong River which enters the larger lake in sight of the hotel at Ashford.

The innumerable caves in the locality are classified as natural - those caused through water erosion or subsidence; artificial - mainly the souterrains of which several are mentioned under "Antiquities", & mixed - that is, natural caverns which have been enlarged or adapted by human effort. All are called "caves" by the local people, & even the most detailed written directions of their whereabouts are not of much use to the visitor since they are so numerous that one is apt to get confused without the aid of a local guide. Guides are not plentiful & there is no professional, but the hotel-keepers may be of assistance in this respect.

Poll na Colum - the "Pigeon Hole" - is the best known & most impressive of all the caverns, & may be reached by several different ways, of which the simplest to describe is that by the Clonbur Rd. Seek directions to Mrs. Gibbon's house, about 1m. W. of Cong, in the townland of Cloonamara, & there you will be shown the Hole, about 200 yds from the cottage, from the front of which a track leads to the edge of the woods - the Pigeon Hole is at the left just where the path reaches the wood. Lady Morgan, Samuel Lover, Sir Wm. Wilde & hosts of other writers have described this cave, & indeed several other caves in the vicinity, & graphic tales & legends of these places have found their way into print & into the folklore & "tourist talk" of the local people.

A flight of 61 steep steps lead downwards between the high perpendicular lichen-and-ivy-draped walls of the chasm &, at the bottom, a dark subterranean stream, over 12' wide, gurgles & splashes along through the dark tunnel in front. A strong light &, if possible, some magnesium flares, would be desirable in order to follow the winding stream through a passage that is strewn with massive boulders & loose stones. The light reveals a scene that is wild & thrilling, &, beyond the need for due care in negotiating the huge rocks, the tunnel may be pursued in safety for a considerable distance.

The common story of the trout bearing the mark of a gridiron is related in connection with this cavern, as well

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as other far more fanciful legends, in all of which, however, the "blessed" trout is mentioned. The Pigeon Hole is on the property of the Irish Land Commission, Forestry Division, & the public are afforded free access. Mrs. Gibbons, at the nearby cottage, acts as guide, though not officially, & is generally handed a small monetary reward.

The Priest's Cave, close to Poll na Colum, is another natural chasm in which a dark red stain in a niche in the limestone is traditionally stated to be the blood-stains of a priest who, it is said, used to hide here in the Penal Days until discovered & slain in his shelter by the priest-hunters.

The Horse Discovery and The Ladies Buttery are both about 2m. from the vill. These two giant chasms or caverns lie close together on the Ashford Golf course, to the right of the "Crusheens", & in the direction of Ashford. They are both natural shafts & rise through the limestone bed from an underground river. The first is The Horse Discovery, & the quaint ironical title derives from the incident, many yrs ago, when a horse & plough &, some say, a man also suddenly disappeared when, literally speaking, "the ground opened & swallowed them". The huge gap in the ground may now be descended to the stream below. The Ladies Buttery is somewhat similar in appearance, but there is no known explanation of its odd name.

Webb's Cave, Kelly's Cave, Marc Anthony's Pool, Poll Mor: These are all within a half-mile walk of Cong vill. & may be examined at ease within the hour. Passing along, amidst the naked rock-beds near the stream which rises from Cornabarry Pool, one of the main uprisings of the subterranean river, & leaving the freak "canal" near the third lock, Marc Anthony's Pool is seen on the right - a large roughly circular dark pond of forbidding appearance & depth. A little stream connects the two pools. From here a path runs eastwards & at about 200 yds Capt. Webb's Cave is encountered. This is, in fact, a 40' perpendicular shaft, the mouth of which is bridged by a moss-grown remnant of the former roof. A rough stone seat is seen alongside &, from the brink of the chasm, a striking glimpse is obtained of steep rocky walls, below which is a greedy-looking darkly ominous underground river. There is an ugly tale told of the associations of a local landowner named Fitzgerald; alias Webb, with this cavern. He is portrayed as a licentious monster who lured a great many women, in turn, to this spot & who, having realised his lustful desire, cast his victims into the dark hole below, from which there was no escape for them. The outrageous "social conditions" prevailing in this country at the time, when no "mere Irishman" might lift a hand, or raise a voice, to defend himself or family from the cruel tortures inflicted on them by tyrant landowners carrying the blessings of an alien rule, enabled Webb to continue his sinister murderous activities without retaliation. The enslaved peasantry sacrificed wives & daughters to this man's awful whims until a selected victim, by a clever ruse, outwitted him at the brink of the hole &, seizing a cleverly-maneuvered opportunity, despatched him to the watery grave which had been intended for herself. Webb, whose real name is said to have been Capt. Webb Fitzgerald, lived at Annagh, not far distant, & used the alias in an effort to cloak his identity. The only explanation offered for his murders of the girls was that he wished to "save himself the embarrassment of meeting them again.

Pursuing the path for another couple of hundred yds eastwards & then branching off via another path on the left, which is followed for nearly 50 yds, Kelly's Cave will be found on the right. This is a real cave & is



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named after an outlaw named Kelly whose family had been wilfully wronged & deprived of their possessions. Kelly adopted a successful career as a benevolent highwayman who robbed the rich & helped the poor; thus, in some measure, obtaining satisfaction for the injustice to which his own people had been subjected.

Crude, dangerously slippery, steps lead down into a huge chamber, approx. 100' long & of considerable breadth. Two holes, which appear as though they might have been artificially made for ventilating purposes, are seen in the roof & between these is a splendid natural stone arch. There is an opening at ground level in one wall, & a few ft over this a circular opening, as large enough for one to squeeze through. It is said that these openings lead to a number of other chambers & galleries but no account of such an exploration, which certainly holds many attractions, is available.

--- Hemp, the English speleologist, stated his opinion that the undoubted signs of the handiwork of prehistoric man in Kelly's Cave, relate it in many ways to the Sardinian & other Mediterranean rock-cut tombs.

Poll Mor - the Big Hole - is on Mr. Peter Foye's lands, nearly 1/2 m. further on in a N.E. direction. This too is a vertical chasm in which the underground river reaches almost to the top.

Ballymaglancy Cave: A few hundred yds before reaching Johnny Burke's Crossroads (from near which is obtained one of the most magnificent views of L. Corrib & the mtns - Clonbur or Finny parish) a turn to the right will lead to this remarkable cavern. It is in a depression 50 yds to the left of the road on Mrs. Murray's lands (3m. Cong). A small fast-flowing stream enters the low, 10' or 12' wide mouth of the cavern & follows a left-hand course inside, where it divides into two branches. The course of the stream may be followed for a considerable distance or, inclining to the right, one may scramble along under a low roof for some yds to a wide, irregular chamber where the roof is higher. At the far end an opening, as though to a dark tunnel, invites investigation, but a powerful light is required. Ballymaglancy cave was noted for a remarkable stalactitic formation which extended from floor to roof in the form of vertical bars enclosed within a circle, but the stalactites were broken off by wanton hands a good many yrs ago, though traces of them are still discernible. At a distance of about 30 yds inside the cave the stream drops into a chasm below, forming a waterfall.

The Canal: The most curious man-made feature of the landscape is the freak canal which was cut in the middle of the last century to link the great Corrib-Galway waterway with the northerly waters of Ls. Mask & Carra. The Corrib had been used from a remote age for the transport by boat of passengers & goods, & the channels & courses of fifty thousand acres of navigable water in that lake are still outlined with buoys & marks. The names of Sir Robert Kane, Nimms & Bald, three of the greatest geological & engineering experts of the time, are associated with this colossal fiasco, though to what extent the blame for the failure of the scheme may be attributed to each & all is obscure in the absence of a detailed governmental report. The object certainly was a very worthy one in those days of inconvenient transport & would have been extremely beneficial to the towns & villages on & near the shores of Lochs Mask & Carra - as also to Galway & other trading centres on the route.

The cutting was started as a relief work during the famine years of the eighteen-forties, & hundreds of men found much-needed employment in blasting & hacking a passage

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through 3 $\frac{1}{2}$  m. of hard limestone rock. Human muscles drove the giant drills, like crow-bars, through iron-like rock to force an entrance for the explosive charge, & the round-shaped borings of these drills are still plentifully in evidence to a depth of sixteen feet from ground level, in the sides of the twenty-six ft wide canal.

Four locks in all were constructed & each of these is an example of beautifully-wrought stone that remains a monument to the skill of the stoneworkers of that day. The first lock is seen in the Ashford Demesne, concealed amidst trees & shrubs on the right of the avenue as one enters from Cong, almost at the bend at Strandhill. This magnificently-executed structure has since been adapted for use as a boat-house &, from it, the water-less cutting may be traced northwards to the second lock, near the road, & the third, near the ball-alley. The fourth, & last, lock - commonly called "The Sluices" - makes contact with L. Mask approx. 1 m. S.W. of Lough Mask House. The final stage of the canal is generally filled, in winter at least, with some few ft of water, but otherwise, excepting for lodgments of rainwater or overflows from the subterranean streams, the remainder of the cutting is dry all the year round.

The canal took about five years in construction & was hurriedly abandoned when it was found that it would not hold water. This ~~ix~~ astonishing fact is due, apparently, to the permeable sieve-like nature of the rock of the limestone plateau through which it was cut. That Kane & Nimmo, two of the ablest mineralogists, should be associated with so gross a blunder is inexplicable, unless, as appears from the report of a special industrial commission in 1885, it be that they planned the cutting through a more practicable terrain & that their plans were altered later by Bald or other engineers.

An attempt was made to rectify the huge error by making a second cutting, which can be seen on the W. side of the canal; near the sawmill.

Eventually the entire canal was sold to Lord Ardilaun. The second passage carries excess water from a turbulent pool & connects with the main canal about  $\frac{1}{2}$  m. N. of Cong - &, oddly enough, even though it is never more than a few hundred yds removed from the unsuccessful channell, it was sunk through an impermeable rock or slate which, if chosen for the great undertaking, must surely have produced satisfactory results. A theory held by Peter Foy is that the nature of the rock is quite suitable & was not at all responsible for the failure, but that the locks were raised to such high levels as to be insurmountable, thus rendering the entire work useless. Adjustment would have been a tremendous task, & Mr. Foy holds, the engineers, rather than admit their stupidity, attributed their failure to geological reasons. The cost of cutting the canal was never published but, undoubtedly, an immense amount must have been spent on it. Nevertheless, it provided employment to men who were in dire need of assistance. Two fine "skew", or curved bridges, one over the Ardilaun cutting on the Cornamona Rd ( $\frac{1}{2}$  m.) & the other just off the Druimsheel Rd near Cong Schoolhouse, were built by Nimmo. The fine stone walls & some of the locks have been greatly demolished in parts by persons who took the stones for building purposes.

ANTIQUITIES: The early history of Cong Abbey is enshrouded in a haze of conjecture & contradiction on the parts of historians & antiquarians. It appears clearly enough, however, that it was built & rebuilt on or near the site of a primitive establishment founded by St. Fechin in the first quarter of the 7th cety. A later bldg was destroyed